

## ERNEST BLOCH

By GUIDO M. GATTI<sup>1</sup>

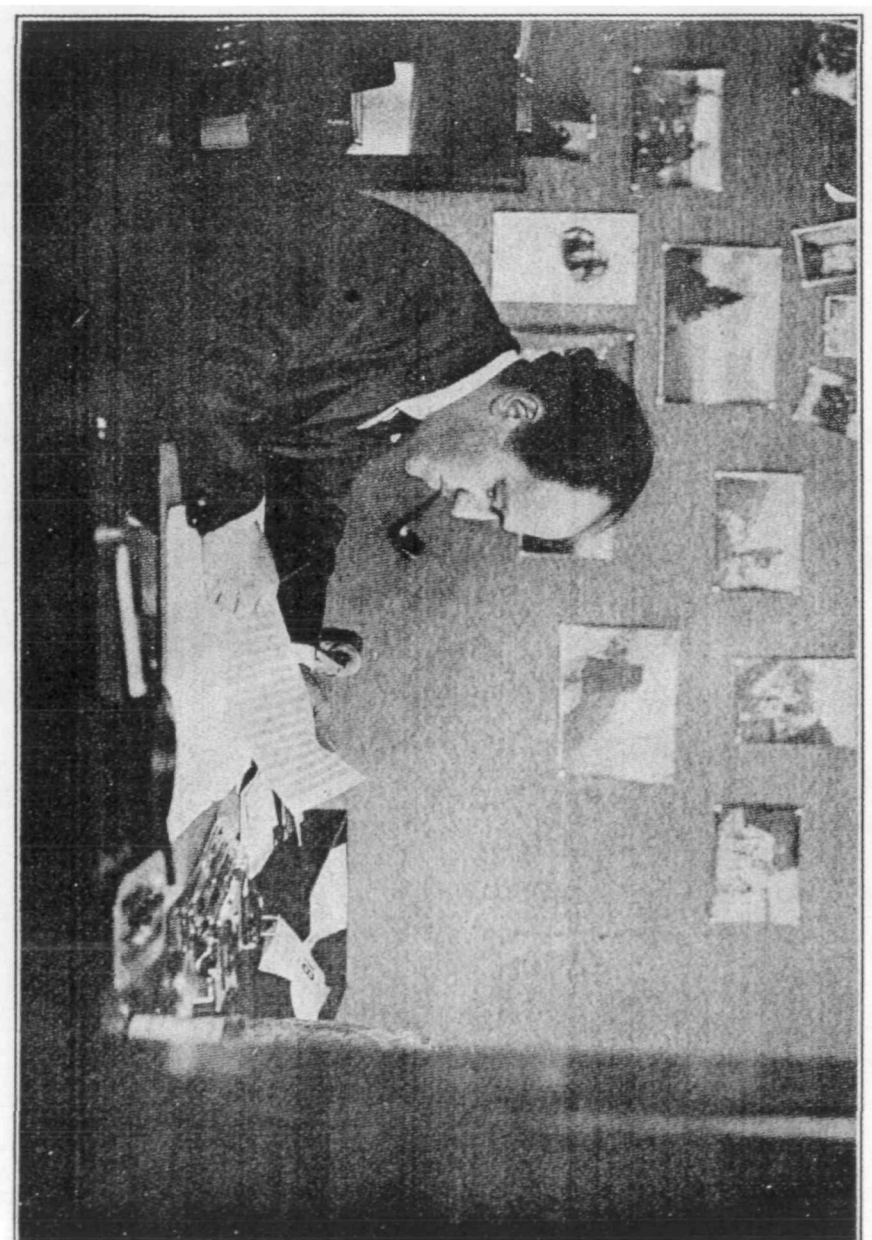
Le temps de la douceur et du dilettantisme est passé. Maintenant il faut des barbares.—*Ch.-Louis Philippe.*

FROM far-away America there reaches us the voice of a musician who is virtually unknown to the public of the old continent; it is a hale and hardy voice, prominent amid the multitude that swell the contemporaneous musical chorus—the voice of a man who cannot be classified as belonging to any given school or any given tendency; who stands by himself in splendid isolation; whom we feel to be a-quiver with our own agitation, and who at the same time is not a product of modern environment; who is both traditional and venturesome, primitive and modern. In a word, he is *some one* with *something* to say.

This man, who engages the attention of everybody in the transoceanic world, is a European; he was born in the heart of Europe and lived there until some four years past, ignored by the great majority, esteemed by a few artists and a few students. His musical output, abundant and estimable remained unpublished until yesterday, when a courageous and high-souled North American publisher brought it to public attention, and also assumed the initiative for its general introduction.

Ernest Bloch, a French Swiss, an exile from his country, is about to return to us after a long silence; but none of his pages has lost aught of its fascination during the time of expectancy. Whether to-day, or yesterday, or to-morrow, the art of Bloch lays hold on our feelings and insistently claims our attention; neither a product of fashion nor linked to the destinies of any faction, representing as it does a man and a race, it has not suffered in consequence of changes of taste. When listening to Bloch's music one seems to hear old echoes from eternity, from something within us that is revived only with the creation of a favorable atmosphere of exaltation and sincerity. Visions of majestic colonnades with statues gigantic and severe, of marble temples overladen with fine gilding and tapestries, of fabulous processions worthy of the Queen of Sheba, of all the biblical splendors; records

<sup>1</sup>By courtesy of the author reprinted from *La Critica Musicale*, April-May, 1920.



Ernest Bloch



of sacred tomes and of vanished wisdoms; heartache for times past; a rapt contemplation of elusive creatures resplendent as the sun and disdainful as the Sphinx; echoes of sacred dances, slow and voluptuous, within precincts saturated with the fumes of incense, of myrrh and cinnamon; fleeting sensations that leave, none the less, a deep trace and make themselves felt again, after the sound has died away, with tenacious obsession.

Of course, not all of Bloch's compositions with which we are acquainted are significant and valuable in the same degree; on the contrary, we can affirm without reserve that the works by which he *ought* to be known begin with the three *Hebrew Poems*, written in 1913—if we make an exception of *Macbeth*, certainly more interesting as a specimen of the music-drama than for maturity of intrinsically musical expression. (All of which was noted with particularity by Pizzetti in the first—and until now unique—study dedicated by Italian critics to the Genevese musician. But we shall return to *Macbeth*.) It might be affirmed, besides, that as Bloch's experience of life went on gathering new stores of sorrowful impressions, his musical expressiveness gathered substance and grew more and more robust, and asserted his rough and impetuous personality against every external influence. The years of more onerous physical toil, from 1906 to 1913, were practically void of creative effort; it was as though all impressions received from the exterior world were continually accumulating and condensing in the artist's mind. Years of harrowing crises, soul-searching and cleansing, in whose course there were doubtless many attempts at self-expression, though not one gave full vent to the tempest agitating the musician's spiritual life. There are certain characteristics of his maturity which are traceable in the earlier works as well; but these are scattered and inorganic, not integrated to constitute that positive esthetic figure which is manifested in full in the works of the Hebrew Cycle. Who cannot readily recognize, in *Schelomo*, melodic traits in common with the culminating scenes of the Shakespearian drama? Who would not identify, in the instrumentation of the Psalms or of *Schelomo*, the author of the instrumentation in the poems *Hiver* and *Printemps*, and in the first symphony? At present, surveying the road along which Bloch's compositions stand to mark the several stations in the development of his *aisthesis*, there is revealed to us the process (if we may so express it) by which this latter, while divesting itself little by little of the traces of foreign influence, raised to the highest potency and possibly aggravated the individual and

germinal notes. After successive clarifications, growing more and more refractory to extraneous elements, the personality of Bloch—constricted, as it were, with regard to the many-faceted manifestation of sensations and impressions—has formed itself compact and unmistakable, homogeneous and substantial. In the works of the Hebrew Cycle there is naught else than Bloch; in passing judgment one may admire or not, but one is constrained to recognize that these pages owe nothing to anybody. Like their author, they present a unified and provocative type.

The symphony in C sharp minor is the earliest work of Bloch's with which we are familiar (it was preceded by a symphonic poem, *Vivre—Aimer*, and a forgotten *Sinfonia orientale*); he wrote it at Munich between his twenty-first and twenty-second birthdays. Two movements of it were performed in the year following its composition at Basel, and later the entire work was brought out at Geneva by Stavenhagen. But the first *real* performance was that which took place in 1915, conducted by the author. Romain Rolland, who was present, wrote to Bloch:

Your symphony is one of the most important creations of the modern school. I do not know any other work in which is revealed a more opulent, a more vigorous, a more impassioned temperament. It is marvellous to think that one has to do with a first work. Had I known you at that time, I should have said: 'Pay no attention to the faultfinding and the praises and the opinions of others. You are your own master. Do not let yourself be turned aside or thrown off the track by anything. Go on expressing yourself in the same way, freely and fully; I guarantee that you will become one of the masters of our time.'

And, knowing neither the Psalms nor *Schelomo*, he was a true prophet, even though his cordial enthusiasm suggested the language of a friend rather than of a critic. This symphony of Bloch's really shows the qualities and defects of the youthful works—among these latter in particular a tendency to discursiveness, besides echoes of other personalities. "At that time (Bloch told us) I was neither completely myself nor completely independent"; and this may be excused in an artist hardly over twenty years of age. Thus the beauty of the work resides rather in the moving power of the formal construction, and in the ardent force of conviction that guides the composer to an unerring truthfulness of expression, than in the originality and lucidity of the musical ideas.

According to the author's intention, the symphony aims to delineate his life as a youth, with its struggles and hopes, its

joys and disappointments. The first movement, beginning *lento*, *poi agitato*, represents the tragedy of life—doubts, labors, hopes; the second, happiness and faith; the third, *vivacissimo*, and of a dolorous restlessness, portrays the ironies and sarcasms of mankind; the last interprets the triumph of the will and final serenity of mood.

Analogy of sentiment led the musician involuntarily to appropriate here and there celebrated passages of kindred inspiration; as when the orchestra is at times attracted by the fascination of Strauss's instrumentation. But even then the symphony was far more than a promise; the first movement, more particularly, is worthy of a place beside the most dramatic pages of Brahms, Mahler, and Bruckner.

The conception of *Macbeth* antedates the first representation of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, and the work was finished the following year. These chronological details are not given to forestall a possible question with regard to derivation—anyone who has heard or read the *Macbeth* of Bloch knows what a disparity of conception sunders the two works—but to establish the almost contemporaneous appearance of two musico-dramatic compositions which I do not hesitate to coördinate, together with *Fedra* by Pizzetti, as assertions of a will to innovation in the contemporary music-drama. I hasten to explain my idea. *Pelléas* is, for me, a perfect work in every respect—in its total conception as a drama or as a musical realization of characters, of sentiments, and of scenes. Debussy labored for ten years on this masterwork, and attained maturity of expression after a long series of experiments. Contrariwise, neither *Macbeth* nor *Fedra* is a perfect work. Debussy finished his composition at forty; Bloch wrote the Shakesperian drama at the age of twenty-three; and Pizzetti began the creation of his work at twenty-nine and ended it three years later. Neither the one nor the other was then capable of giving us what they gave us in the sequel, especially in these latest years and in other fields; and what they assuredly will still give us to-morrow, the former with *Jezebel*, the latter with *Deborah*.

*Macbeth* ought, therefore, in our opinion, to be considered as a not wholly successful attempt in the field of musical drama, but nevertheless one which will always hold our interest and win a frequent hearing through the perfection of its dramatic expression. The work has compelled our consideration since our reading of it some years ago. Accustomed as we were to all the conventional melodramatism of the end of the nineteenth century; nauseated by the everlasting repetition of the forms and formulas

from which were constructed, after the fashion of a mechanical toy, the musical works of the ultimate Verdians, of the *veristi* and the Puccini-Massenet following; irritated by the indolence of the younger generation, who were incapable of facing—and still more so of solving—the dramatico-musical problems, while making instead a great show of chasing after success with an exploitation of every artistic and inartistic means;—then, after reading through Bloch's *Macbeth*, one felt oneself in the presence of something new and beautiful. And one had a feeling of keen delight, as on finally meeting a beloved and cherished friend after long and wearisome wandering among unprofitable and unsympathetic folk. In *Macbeth* we have, first and foremost, a musical drama; all is subordinated to that; we do not find—with one or two exceptions—musical episodes, that is to say, fragments, *hors-d'œuvres* which have a life of their own and, in consequence, possess a ponderable value when detached from the scene or the act; there are no compositorial self-indulgences to cause stagnation or deviation, and to distract attention from the development of the plot. Bloch follows the dramatic design with his every musical faculty; he is in the centre of the action and moulds the characters, and moves them, and endows them with sentient life, bearing in mind at every moment the necessities of the drama, leading up to its climax and dénouement with ever-increasing intensity.

The musical speech of *Macbeth* is of a fascinating simplicity. If we make exception of the two grand choral scenes which close, respectively, the first and last acts,—and in which Bloch discovers in full his wonderful skill as a contrapuntist and constructor—there is not a page which has not an appearance of leanness, beneath which, however, there lies an unsuspected emotional potency. A rhythmic figuration which repeats itself measure after measure like an inexorable fate; a harsh chord that gathers and spreads abroad like a presentiment; and, above them, a grave, sustained melodic declamation which seems disdainfully void of acoustic suavity, yet is incisive and expressive, and truly sympathetic to the word. Through these means Bloch creates atmospheres pregnant with meaning, comparable to those investing the drama of the two lovers in Debussy's opera, but with this difference (which, for the moment, is of chief importance): that within this atmosphere the personages lead a radically human life, and comport themselves under the influence of passion in a manner for which we find a parallel in certain conjunctures of our own lives, gravating themselves in a plastic relief which

renders them powerfully expressive of their soul-life. Whereas, with Debussy, the figures sometimes fade away, dissolving in the atmosphere and appearing, so to speak, like vague phantoms created by the very movement and color thereof, in Bloch's opera the dramatis personæ—and here I mean more particularly that terrible pair, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth—stand out from their environment and dominate it, themselves at times even creating the atmosphere. Their volcanic spontaneity of intuition stamps them ineffaceably on the musical material; their bodies cast obscure and gigantic shadows; their voices have a vast resonance like the words of a man whom the drama has transported at a bound into the very heart of creation, and who, though still a mortal, thinks and speaks with the soul of a hero. Should I desire to point out the next of kin—in music—to Macbeth and his tragic spouse, I should have to seek them in the barbarous and michelangelesque drama of Modest Mussorgsky, in that primitive figure and—by reason of the complexity of his *pathos*—elusive personality, Boris Godounov. Certain scenes in *Macbeth*—for example, that culminating one of Duncan's murder, of which, though it passes off-stage, we see the living reflection in the face and the words of Lady Macbeth, with its terrible silences and the fearsome whisperings of the night, and the duet that follows agitatedly, by fits and starts, with spectral hallucinations ("Macbeth has murdered sleep!")—find their counterparts in certain scenes of the Russian drama, such as those of the convent and of the Tsar's death. This juxtaposition of Bloch and Mussorgsky assumes a noteworthy interest and importance, and we should dwell on it, were we not urged by impatience to enter upon the mature period of Bloch's work. Pizzetti, however, did dilate on *Macbeth* in his essay, which—like everything he writes—is acute; but, for obvious reasons, he did not tell us of the affinities that subsist between his drama and that of Bloch. Now, these affinities are numerous and of diverse character; they concern the man in his rounded-out conception of art, in his musicianship, and, in the specific case, in his intuitive grasp of the music-drama. A comparative study of the works of these two musicians, alike and unlike, yet born in the same year, though at an interval of a few days, would not be void of interest and would assume a character far more profound than that of a pure coincidence; but we must press on without further delay, though not without mentioning, in this connection, among the "Mussorgsky" numbers the Torture Scene and the Death of Fedra—pages which will be admired for many a long year.

For us the most prominent defect in Bloch's score is its comparative monotony in rhythm and harmony. The musician sometimes takes overmuch pleasure in the insistency of certain agogic figures and certain altered harmonies; to be sure, his intuition almost invariably seizes on the one or the other as an adequate expression of the momentary dramatic situation; but then he dwells and insists on it for too long a time; and it happens that the situation is left behind, while the symphonic commentary which it evoked still lingers. Syncopated figures, and duple times in triplet-rhythm, abound; the well-nigh continuous alternation of these two movements, while it may share in lending to the dramatic action that shade of gloom and depression which is in keeping with it, finally grows tiresome and develops a sense of immobility in scenes where the music ought to express progress. Moreover, the scarcity of vivid contrasts contributes to the levelling of the successive dramatic episodes; one is conscious of the absence of those violent shocks that occur so frequently in the later compositions—of those fantastic divagations which threaten at every step to capsize *Schelomo*, for example, while agitating the hearer with a swift and poignant emotion, or raising him of a sudden to the loftiest heights of lyricism. But whatever is lacking in *Macbeth*, although it may affect its musical value, in no wise diminishes its importance in the history of the musical drama, wherein Bloch's opera should be recorded among the two or three—till now—most significant specimens of their kind in the twentieth century.

The *Poèmes d'Automne* for voice are of decidedly minor importance; the individuality of Bloch, though sometimes emerging with its distinguishing features, especially in the vocal line, often strays into reminiscences of French lyrics, and discovers a mundane physiognomy bearing no resemblance to the musician's own. On the other hand, in the symphonic poems *Hiver* and *Printemps*, which are played in direct succession for the sake of contrast, we find the finest characteristics of Bloch the writer for orchestra—his calculated economy of sonorous power, the mellowness in the blending of timbres, the proneness to make of each instrument a living personality, and the clean-cut contours of the phrases confided to the solo instruments. Bloch's melody is never undulating, sinuous, pliant of outline (this man never insinuates himself into your soul by dint of flattery, but—if he can—overmasters it with violence); it is a melody which, even when sweet, melancholy and dolorous, is never tender. Even when (as in the symphonic poem *Hiver*) the principal theme

of the English horn tends to create an atmosphere of lifeless desolation, to depict a gloomy and mournful landscape. Bloch's sadness of heart is that of his race, recalling and invoking their native land in the Babylonian captivity. It is a fervent longing, a striving which, however impotent, is resolute, an energetic and centripetal concentration of spirit. It is not, therefore, the vagueness of a confused dream, or the crepuscular aspiration for the remote, for the fantastic and unreal. Bloch's instrumental themes—the more so because of their strongly vocal type—give us the impression of pouring from the heart of a priest or prophet, in whose voice the people hearken to the eternal verities and recognize the true end of life.

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The *Hebrew Poems* ("Trois poèmes juifs") constitute, as the author himself has stated, the initial opus of a new period, which consequently begins in 1913. This new period, now still running its course, includes the works of the Hebrew Cycle down to the *Israel* symphony and the opera *Jezebel* (in preparation), together with the string-quartet, though this seemingly does not belong to it.

This great cycle claims the appellation "Hebrew," not because Bloch employs Hebraico-Oriental themes and modes in the works of which it is constituted, but for a much profounder reason, which he himself communicated to us:

I do not propose or desire to attempt a reconstruction of the music of the Jews, and to base my works on melodies more or less authentic. I am no archæologist. I believe that the most important thing is to write good and sincere music—*my own* music. It is rather the Hebrew spirit that interests me—the complex, ardent, agitated soul that vibrates for me in the Bible; the vigor and ingenuousness of the Patriarchs, the violence that finds expression in the books of the Prophets, the burning love of justice, the desperation of the preachers of Jerusalem, the sorrow and grandeur of the book of Job, the sensuality of the Song of Songs. All this is in us, all this is in me, and is the better part of me. This it is which I seek to feel within me and to translate in my music—the sacred race-emotion that lies dormant in our souls.

And when "Jews" are spoken of, I would add "ancient." Bloch seems descended, not from the tribes of Israel dispersed throughout the world, despised and neglected, who are silently perfecting their terrible weapons, patience, persistency and astuteness, but from the free sons of Judah, Asiatic shepherds, wandering from pasture to pasture, to-day masters and to-morrow slaves,

joyous voluptuaries of life and adorers of a warrior-god, the enemy and destroyer of all rival peoples. Nowadays, such a race is inconceivable; it exists only as a splendid tradition. Of this tradition, which he has felt reawakening within himself with the fervency of a live and urgent necessity, Bloch has fashioned the hero of his cycle; and for this reason he ought to be considered as the first, and perhaps the sole, *Jewish musician* that the history of music affords us. (Per contra, there exist many *musicianly Jews* more or less influenced by certain melodico-rhythmic traits of Hebrew origin; from Mendelssohn to Meyerbeer, from Rubinstein to Carl Goldmark, from Ferdinand Hiller to Mahler, the last-named possibly the most characteristic from this point of view. But none of these reveals so pregnant a racial personality as that of Bloch; in the artistic line they all appear like descendants of Mendelssohn, *ce notaire élégant* of Debussyan memory.)

But now, having established this characteristic of the esthetic figure which is Bloch, further insistence on it would be ill advised. For this would tend to establish at the same time, to a certain degree, a limitation, a constraint, that the works of Bloch do not show; in their broader expression these works stir the heart by typically human characteristics, by a universality of *pathos*, which do not readily lend themselves to classification. For the rest, one cannot contend that Bloch will still continue to reveal so convincingly certain racial traits; from a man of forty, in the full vigor of his creative powers, there may be expected any day a work exhibiting some predominant feature of a different sort; of this, we may add, some symptoms are already discernible in the *Suite* for viola, one of his most recent compositions.

*Danse—Rite—Cortège funèbre*—these are the titles of the three Hebrew Poems for orchestra. In the first there is a great display of colors, from the most vivid to the dullest, seen through a series of reflexes and opalescent veils; the employment of Oriental modes and of certain muffled sonorities lends now and again a sense of sensual languor which well expresses the mystico-voluptuous character of the Hebrew dance, while generating a dim, mysterious background therefor. The *Rite* is of a more emotional character, notwithstanding the presence of "something solemn and remote, as in ritual ceremonies." In it Bloch incorporated scenes of sacerdotal gravity, wherein, as against a scenario of golden ornaments and richly decorated hangings, the sacred words of the Celebrant slowly ascend. For in the *Rite* we already find that broad phrasing, full of majesty and meaning, which later forms one of the finest peculiarities of *Schelomo*.

To these two preceding compositions, of an eminently decorative character, is adjoined the dolorous finale of the *Funeral Procession*, wherein there is only sorrow, an infinite sense of dismayful grief. Written on the death of his father, it might bear as epigraph the biblical sentence, "If there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow." Here we find another of Bloch's characteristics—the already noted insistency of a rhythmic figure, as if it were intended to arouse an impression of the fatality which looms up and runs its course without heed to the supplications of mankind. The third Hebrew Poem forms one crescendo from the beginning to the moment of eternal separation, when sorrow finds expression in the most despairing and insensate outcries; yet there enters one ray of light to penetrate the gloom (a tender melody, serene and chaste) and pour the balm of resignation. The earthly part dies, but the spirits of our dear ones remain with us; the more we loved them, the nearer will they be, in silent communication with our hearts; the greater our despair at their death, the deeper the consolation they give us for all the tears we shed. This sublime lirico-evangelical admonishment is set forth on the final pages of the *Cortège funèbre* with all the warmth of firm conviction.

The musician drew his inspiration directly from the verses of the Bible for the three next-following works—three *Psalms* for one voice with orchestra. Edmond Fleg, the composer's excellent and faithful collaborator, adapted (with certain textual liberties) three masterpieces of Jewish poetry, Psalms cxiv, cxxxvii and xxii. In them all there reverberates the leonine voice of the people of Israel, and towers the majesty of the race; the musician reawakens the sensations of vehement expansion and energetic speech which we have already noted as peculiarly his own. Bloch's imagination revels in many-figured, animated frescos, in limitless landscapes teeming with impassioned life. When he composes for the pianoforte—and this came to pass, originally, only in the *Poèmes d'Automne* and in the *Suite* for viola, which he straightway hastened to clothe in a symphonic vestment—one feels the orchestra; the pianoforte, that most perfect medium for the creation of an atmosphere of intimacy and delicate coloring, does not suffice him for portraying the vast complex of his visions. Consider for a moment the picture represented by Psalm cxxxvii. The Jewish people, captive in Babylon, is discovered along the banks of the river; hanging their harps on the branches, they weep for Jerusalem. And the people of the oppressor require of them songs of mirth. "How shall we

sing the Lord's song in a strange land? If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy!" And again: the immense assemblage rise suddenly to their feet, with arms upraised in frenzied agitation imploring and conjuring their God: "Remember, O Lord, the children of Edom in the day of Jerusalem, who said, *Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation thereof.* O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed, happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones!"—This scene, of which only the biblical verses can bring home to us a vivid conception in its crude realism, and which Michelangelo alone might have depicted with his terrible artistry, Bloch's music succeeds in expressing in admirable relief. Fashioned, as it is, of violent contrasts, of well-nigh brutal alternations of sonority, fitful and exclamatory, it attains a vivid immediacy of dramatic emotion. Its asymmetries, its angulosities, its barbaric simplicities, even its rhythmic monotony and its insufficient variety of harmonic combinations, all aid it in matching the power of the biblical narrative.

And there is still another point on which we should dwell. Bloch's more recent music is not interesting music, in that acceptation of the term which is general among us students of modern music; one does not savor its harmonic subtleties or instrumental refinements on reading it from the printed page; on hearing it, one is moved by its impetus. Bloch's technics are extremely modern; he quite calmly allows himself certain liberties which neither Schönberg nor Strawinski nor Casella ever dreamt of taking. Yet his compositions cannot be called *ultra-modern*, perhaps because the heterodox elements in his mode of expression are in themselves not important, but are founded on those which I will term *traditional*, using the word without any shade of depreciation. Certain tonal shocks, certain brusque shifts of tonality, do not surprise us, for they seem quite natural and logical in music like that of Bloch, barbaric and refractory. All in all, the exceptionality of his speech—either with regard to the harmony or to the rhythmic designs—does not strike us as *provoked* (we do not say *designed*) by an excess of refinement and intellectualism, as in many a page by contemporaries, but, as it were, by a primigenial instinct impatient of bonds and conventions. The music of many moderns seems to us beyond the school; that of Bloch, before it. The former has no memory of its past and attempts the construction of a future; the latter has no past, but is radiant with the youth of uncultured

and happy peoples without a history. Of these it possesses all the defects and all the qualities; even the defects are engaging, for they are ingenuous and calculated to set the good qualities in a stronger light. The level monotony of the background, at times exasperating, makes the fiery transcurion of certain melodic exclamations stand out in marvellous relief, emblazoned thereon like arabesques of lightning against nightly skies.

Bloch has reached the perfection of *his* music with the Hebrew rhapsody for solo violoncello with orchestra, which bears the name of the great king *Schelomo* (Solomon). In this, without taking thought for development and formal consistency, without the fetters of a text requiring interpretation, he has given free course to his fancy; the multiplex figure of the founder of the Great Temple lent itself, after setting it upon a lofty throne and chiseling its lineaments, to the creation of a phantasmagorical entourage of persons and scenes in rapid and kaleidoscopic succession. The violoncello, with its ample breadth of phrasing, now melodic and with moments of superb lyricism, now declamatory and with robustly dramatic lights and shades, lends itself to a reincarnation of Solomon in all his glory, surrounded by his thousand wives and concubines, with his multitude of slaves and warriors behind him. His voice resounds in the devotional silence, and the sentences of his wisdom sink into the hearts as the seed into a fertile soil: "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever. . . . He that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow."—The orchestra palpitates in all the colors of the rainbow; from the vigorous and transparent orchestration there emerge waves of sound that seem to soar upward in stupendous vortices and fall back in a shower of myriads of iridescent drops. At times the sonorous voice of the violoncello is heard predominant amid a breathless and fateful obscurity throbbing with persistent rhythms; again, it blends in a phantasmagorical paroxysm of polychromatic tones shot through with silvery clangors and frenzies of exultation. And anon one finds oneself in the heart of a dream-world, in an Orient of fancy, where men and women of every race and tongue are holding argument or hurling maledictions; and now and again we hear the mournful accents of the prophetic seer, under the influence of which all bow down and listen reverently. This vivid coloration is lost in the passage from the orchestra to the pianoforte; in the pianistic transcription the designs, the sketches,

one might say, of this immense panorama remain; yet the central figure still retains features of the highest interest. The violoncello-part is of so remarkably convincing and emotional power that it may be set down as a veritable masterpiece; not one passage, not a single beat, is inexpressive; the entire discourse of the soloist, vocal rather than instrumental, seems like musical expression intimately conjoined with the Talmudic prose. The pauses, the repetitions of entire passages, the leaps of a double octave, the chromatic progressions, all find their analogues in the Book of Genesis—in the versicles, in the fairly epigraphic reiteration of the admonitions (“and all is vanity and vexation of spirit”), in the unexpected shifts from one thought to another, in certain *crescendi* of emotion that end in explosions of anger or grief uncontrolled.

The statement of characteristics which has just been made, and which results from an examination of the greater part of Bloch's works—namely, that this is never “absolute music,” that it does not present itself as a simple outpouring of sonority, but always claims to have a precise meaning, to interpret the rhythms of spoken language or of the emotions—appears to be contradicted by the advent of a recent quartet, which is indeed one of the finest things the Genevese musician has written. Yet such is not the case; even in this form, *the purest* of all, we discover unmistakable traces of Bloch's *aisthesis* (akin to that of Mussorgski in this respect, as well), magnetically attracted toward the dramatized word and toward that instrumental declamation that we noticed in *Schelomo*. Even in this quartet we do not experience the physical pleasure afforded by the harmonic coexistence and interpenetration of the parts, or by the brilliant fusion of the timbres of the several instruments; but we have the sensation of hearing voices that appeal to us by diverse characteristics, but are always essentially dramatic and expressive of emotions. Even in the quartet we are again haunted by this constant conception of a drama, for the musician never takes delight in constructing for the pleasure of hearing the four instruments *sound well*. Bloch carried over into the quartet those same objectives and those same expressions which he employed in the *Psalms* and in the musical drama; he did not bend to the requirements and conventions of the form, but sought to mould it to his will. In this he was not invariably successful, his already noted excesses of musical speech being here yet more clearly revealed. (In this there is, of course, no intention whatever to depreciate the technical value of the composition, which is

54 *Al tempo* *Andando*

1. 2.  
3. 4.  
5. 6.  
C. A.  
1.  
Cl. 3.  
3.  
Cl. bass  
1.  
2.  
3.  
1. 2.  
3. 4.  
5. 6.  
Cora  
1. 2.  
3.  
Hr. I  
Hr. II  
1. 2.  
3.  
Alt. dir.  
Vi. dir.

*Serif et solennel (adagio molto) 1. mouvement 25-28* **Symphonie "Israël"** Dukak -

3  
Flûte  
2 Flûte  
1 Corneille  
2 Cl. b.  
1 Cl. b.  
2 B.  
1 B.  
4 Corneille  
(EA)  
3 Violoncelle  
(w)  
3 Violoncelle  
1 Violoncelle  
Violoncelle  
Batterie  
Harpe  
Org. 1.  
2  
Alto solo  
Alto  
Org. 2.  
C.B.

Facsimile of two pages from Ernest Bloch's score of his symphony Israel

very great, and once again demonstrates—as though that were necessary—Bloch's assured mastery of the means of expression.) Concerning the emotional content of the quartet the composer has disclosed his program, which we present below, without, however, attaching special importance to it. The complex of the conception represents (to tell it in his own words), *the direct expression of my feelings, of my view of the world; it is a part of my life, a reflex of my joys and of my sufferings*. The first movement is a lament of *purely Hebraic inspiration, a blending of bitterness, of impassioned violence, and of anguish*; the second *describes a vision of human obliquity, the mouthings of perverse passions and the horrors of a desperate strife*; the third movement, of a pastoral character, represents a reverie *amid the sublimities of Nature, eternally true and consolatory*; while the finale returns to the visions of strife, and concludes in a resigned pessimism.

The question whether the composition communicates, more or less, the sensations of these four psychological phases, interests us up to a certain point; nowadays it is an admitted fact that in music every one finds what he is capable of feeling or disposed to feel. And some find nothing in it—the fault being sometimes their own, and sometimes that of the author, who put nothing into it.—What is beyond all question is, that Bloch's quartet merits a place beside *Schelomo* as constituting one more proof of the musician's genial creative power, and so makes the ignorance of European audiences with regard to his best work seem the more deplorable to us—that is, their ignorance of that which, as we have seen, had its inception in the *Hebrew Poems*, and whose latest examples (with which we are not acquainted) are the symphony *Israel*, the opera *Jezebel*, on which Bloch has been working for some years, and the *Suite* for viola which took the Coolidge prize and was performed, according to the conditions of the competition, at last year's Berkshire Festival with most triumphant success. On the strength of American criticism, furthermore, we stated that this *Suite* marks a new orientation in the composer's art and makes us look forward to his future with ever-increasing confidence.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>This much discussed Suite was first played, in its original version for viola and piano, by Louis Bailly and Harold Bauer at Pittsfield, Mass., on September 27, 1919. Even those who disliked the suite could not but admire the superlatively artistic performance. The suite was played for the first time in New York, at Æolian Hall, November 18, 1919, by Emil Ferrir and Harold Bauer who rejoined Louis Bailly for the second New York performance before the Society of the Friends of Music in January, 1920. The first performances of the suite in its version for viola and orchestra took place with Louis Bailly as soloist at concerts of the National Symphony Orchestra under Artur Bodansky at Carnegie Hall, New York, on November 5 and 7, 1920. The very

Bloch's music—and never, as in the present case, could it be spoken of as the complex of all his compositions, without making distinctions and classifications—possesses the character of the man; it is a music practically lacking in suavity and adornment; it seems rough-hewn with a chisel from a rude block of granite. Its lines are not smoothly bent, nor do they stretch out in soft curves, nor do they voluptuously seduce the sense by the fascination of grace; Bloch's music grips you and shakes you; it seizes you like a savage and sways you at will. His music makes you suffer; it is the expression of an intense nature that gave ear to it, and it is the most faithful and forceful expression of the impression made on one by hearing or reading Bloch's compositions. In *Schelomo*, in the *Psalms*, there are no twilight lassitudes or languors of tenderness; the music of Bloch does not know the meaning of that Verlainesque phrase uttered to evoke within us a sort of voluptuous stupor, an artificial paradise wherein the senses grow dull and a soothing atmosphere enfolds us and allures us into dreaming and the extinction of Nirvana. Bloch's music reveals to us the tragic meaning of life; it unrolls before us the eternal panorama of the world, where warring

difficult score received a reading which other violists, conductors and orchestras will find it hard to surpass.

These memorable performances again sharply divided those who profess to be bored and repelled by what they call Bloch's cacophony and general musical ugliness and those whom this suite deeply moves with its fantastic but logical imagination, its uncompromising sincerity and individuality of utterance, its uncanny technique—and its beauty. To be sure, not the beauty of a "deutsch romantisches Gefühl" which, as Edward J. Dent correctly claims, persists in controlling the likes and dislikes of most of us, but beauty, nevertheless. (The third movement is of sublime beauty and sustains with marvelously calculated nocturnesque orchestral colors a euphony which only deaf prejudice can deny.) The Suite was conceived with the Orient as back-ground. Not the Orient of Goethe's "West-östlicher Divan" but of the darker-skinned East of Java and beyond. That accounts for Bloch's weird and fantastic orchestral "adjectives," ejaculations and "cacophonies" which apparently so irritated many of our concert-goers who never notice anything "ugly" in the orchestra of, for instance, Schumann's otherwise lovely symphonies. Such persons, from time immemorial, have rebelled against any new and piercing sonority that takes them by surprise. They are irritated and forthwith condemn the whole work as a personal insult. Unfamiliarity, too, it would seem, breeds contempt. It is likewise true that most of us who in their youth fought and bled for the then unfamiliar, sooner or later reach the age when we need a rejuvenating gland, for which—alas!—our ever increasing, reverential love of the classics is not an infallible, enlightening substitute.

There still exist lovers of literature whom the beauty of Poe's "Masque of the Red Death," "King Pest" or "The Conqueror Worm" shocks into epithetic fits of disgust; so there ever will be lovers of music in whom daring works of genius like Bloch's Viola Suite will release all the synonyms of "ugly" in their vocabulary. Whether or not the orchestral version of the suite be preferable to the original version with piano, is a matter of taste. In certain spots the original version sounds more convincing than the orchestral—and *vice versa*, but space forbids to analyze the reasons for this opinion. The essential fact remains that in either version Ernest Bloch has given us the greatest work for viola in musical literature, and what is more important, one of the most significant and powerful works of our time.—Ed.

passions clash and on the horizon hovers the dazzling red of a conflagration continually renewed, that fitfully illumines the fatal struggle of humankind.

This Hebrew does not see the happenings amidst which he is living. It seems as though he had lived always, and had already sung in the reign of the son of David. His art appears anachronistic, because it is eternal; its idioms may appear emphatic and magniloquent if we measure them by the standard of our social practices, of our conventions, of our mediocre egoisms and pygmy hypocrisies.

The times in which we live, those of my generation—that is, of the generation which is about to arrive at its thirtieth year—have produced a Debussy and a Bloch; and never has a more striking contrast appeared to one who is familiar with the works of these two musicians. But Debussy is much more representative of his period; if one were to name the musical admirable Crichton of the vicennium preceding the world-war, he would have to say, without hesitation, Debussy. A vicennium of bewilderment and expectancy; anxious, pallid years; an epoch of crises of volition, and of the weakening (even the negation) of ethical values.

Bloch's period of fruition synchronizes almost exactly with the tremendous conflict whereby the world has been convulsed and overturned as by a terrific earthquake; can this signify that the new epoch is beginning, and that, in matters musical, Bloch is to be its leader? To affirm this seems venturesome; and yet we venture to do so, so many are the signs and tokens which present themselves to confirm us in our idea.

Certain it is, that the immensity of the drama whose final scene has not yet been shown, the primordial grandeur of the struggle for the hegemony of the world, the revulsion of mankind to elemental passions goaded to an unheard-of paroxysm, and, finally, the ostentatious disdain for every acquired habit of a refined and cultivated community, find echoes and utterance in the most forceful pages of the Genevese musician. In them we recognize that musical expression which best succeeds in conveying the impressions of the life unfolding all around us; in them we descry the lightnings of the tempest, we hear the fierce voices of men hurled one against the other in furious turmoil;—and we listen to the voice of God, that reaches us through a rift in the clouds and renews our faith in life.

To-day it seems to us that Bloch's creative activity has thrown off its shackles; his affirmation of will and of strength

awakens echoes in our inmost souls, shaken by the tempest; his musical speech, that yesterday told of the storm, is to-day an expression of the necessity for our introspective refreshment at the wellsprings of all spiritual life, and for the wholesome development of our spiritual natures and of intellects capable of sane and fruitful thinking.

If it be indispensable—as it is—to be immersed body and soul in the life we are living, and at the same time to nourish one's self on the substance of the past, new senses will be needed for interpreting the world, a new language free from all trammels for expounding its ultimate meaning. Yes, in very truth: *il nous faut des barbares!*

#### BIO-BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The life of this musician is not devoid of interest to any one who devotes himself to the study of his works; it will, therefore, be opportune to describe it here at some length.

Ernest Bloch, of Hebrew parentage, was born at Geneva, July 24, 1880; his father was a clock-merchant. None of his family had pursued musical studies or had shown any special aptitude for the art of tones. The boy began by studying the violin in his native town, but at the age of eleven he decided to devote himself entirely to composition. He made a solemn vow to do so; this vow he wrote down on a sheet of paper which he burned in the open air on a heap of stones, as if carrying out a rite of his people. Naturally, he encountered the opposition of his parents, but he nevertheless succeeded in repairing to Brussels (violin with Schorg and Isaye, composition with Rasse), and later to Frankfort, where he entered the school of Ivan Knorr. He passed something over a year at Munich under Thuille, then two at Paris, and returned to Geneva in 1904.

As usually happens—and it would have been a wonder if, in the case of a musician of Bloch's talent, matters had gone otherwise—no one cared to interest himself in him or his works; orchestra directors and concert managers equivocally "took under advisement" the scores of the unknown writer, who—it should be added—was not of a temperament to seek favor insistently or to resort to indirect means for the accomplishment of his object. Bloch was not excessively perturbed, his tenacious will and a characteristic spirit of fatalism sustained him then and thereafter, even when destiny was still more cruelly opposed. His father's affairs were rapidly becoming difficult, a doubtful future was impending

over the musician and his family. And all at once Bloch begins to sell cuckoo-clocks; he takes entire charge of the slender paternal interests, learns in brief space the science of commercial accounts, and commercial laws and customs, travels in Germany as salesman and agent for his goods, is daily absorbed in business. Meantime he was working on his *Macbeth*; in November, 1910, the opera was produced at the Opéra-Comique, and Bloch hastened to Paris, remaining there for the time required to assist at the rehearsals and to attend the representation. Chauvinistic criticism regarded it askance; it was a public success, but the clans of his Parisian colleagues consigned the work to the tomb. Bloch philosophically returned to Geneva and resumed his dual rôle of administrator and artist.

During this period (1909-10) he conducted the concerts at Lausanne and Neuchâtel; after two years his post was taken by one of his pupils. Bloch did not wax profane; he assisted at the new conductor's rehearsals, and aided him with his advice. In the following year he was chosen professor of composition and esthetics at the Conservatory of Geneva, but in 1915 he was dispossessed of that function. He retired without animosity, and fell back on his work.

His compositions were brought out for the first time in Switzerland, but the name of Bloch did not pass the frontiers; for Europe he is to-day—we repeat it—virtually unknown.

But Bloch clings, above all, to his freedom. He is a man of fantastic pride; he cannot be tamed by hunger. If Fortune does not come, he will not go in search of her. He submitted himself to the most onerous toil to gain a livelihood for himself and his family; but no one has made him swerve by a hair's breadth from his path. He knows whither he would go—or, rather, he knows what he can do, and does it; to him nothing else matters.

In America, where his genius is celebrated and his works are continually performed, he arrived as a man unknown, at the head of the orchestra accompanying Maude Allan, the dancer; from Ohio he came to New York without a penny, without friends, with nothing whatever, and he sought nothing of any one. His compositions have made their way on their own merits. In America there exists a cult of such fighters of tough fibre, of such monolithic men whose moral stature is of a sort that towers above the crowd. And when the crowd recognizes them, it perforce bows down before them and worships them as gods.

Of Bloch's compositions listed below, those with an asterisk have been published or will be published shortly by the New York house of

G. Schirmer, both in full orchestral score and in piano score. *Macbeth* alone is the property of G. Astruc & Cie and printed by Enoch & Cie of Paris.

1896—*Orientale*, symphonic poem.

1900—*Viire-Aimer*, symphonic poem.

1902-2—Symphony in C sharp minor.

1903-6—*Macbeth*, lyric drama in a prologue and three acts. Book by Edmond Fleg (after Shakespeare). First performed in Paris, at the Opéra-Comique, Nov. 30, 1910.

1905—*Hiver-Printemps*, two symphonic poems.

1906—*Poèmes d'Automne* (B. Rodès), for voice and piano:

1. La Vagabonde.
2. Le Déclin.
3. L'Abri.
4. Invocation.

1913—*Trois Poèmes juifs*, for orchestra:

1. Danse.
2. Rite.
3. Cortège funèbre.

1912-14—*Two Psalms* (adapted from the Hebrew by E. Fleg), for soprano and orchestra (or piano):

1. Psalm 114.
2. Psalm 137.

1916—*Schelomo* (Solomon), Hebrew rhapsody for violoncello and orchestra (or piano).

\**Psalm 22* (adapted from the Hebrew by E. Fleg), for baritone and orchestra (or piano).

\*String-quartet in B minor.

1916-18—*Israel*, symphony in F.

1916-?—*Jezabel*, lyric drama, book by E. Fleg (in preparation).

1918-19—*Suite* for viola and piano (or orchestra). Took the Coolidge prize in 1919.<sup>1</sup>

(Translated by Theodore Baker.)

<sup>1</sup>To this list must be added the Violin Sonata of 1920. The composer is also said to be composing a pianoforte concerto. Contrary to the belief of his distinguished Italian critic, the life of Ernest Bloch has not been a bed of roses in America of which country he has become a naturalized citizen. Recognition, sweetened by more or less intelligent opposition, there has been indeed, but also the struggle to make a living as teacher and conductor. It is to be hoped that the recent appointment of Ernest Bloch as organizer and director of the new Cleveland conservatory will not interfere with his creative work as a composer. In saying this, I have in mind the experience of noted American scholars who became college presidents and whom administrative problems compelled to abandon creative work.—Ed.